

WORK AMONG THE BLIND (1885)



WILLIAM J. DAY

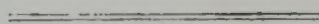
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WORK AMONG THE BLIND.

BY

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SOCIETY.



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WORK AMONG THE BLIND.

PERHAPS, of all the agencies that have been provided to meet the wants of the blind, none has proved more valuable than that which has secured the visitation of this class of the afflicted at their homes. For more than a quarter of a century, the Home Teaching Society for the Blind has carried on good work in the metropolis. Similar societies exist in various parts of the kingdom, but there are still large tracts of country unworked. It is, as the visitor of one of these country societies that I have acquired a knowledge of the subject on which I purpose to speak; and I, therefore, hope that my remarks will be found to be of a practical character.

How are the homes of the blind to be found? was the first question that met me on entering on my work. It did not require much reflection to remind one that blind people must eat as well as those who could see; and I, therefore, wended my way to the provision shops. From these tradesmen I obtained the names of several blind people. On visiting these, I learnt of others; and, thus, by degrees, I was able to make up a directory of the blind in a county containing an area of over 700 square miles. Here, perhaps, I should say that visitation of any sort is very different in the country to what it is in a town.

In London, for instance, you find the people you want in one street after another, and you are never far from your centre. But in the country it is very different. There you may go thirteen or fourteen miles for the sake of seeing three or four persons; and it may be a month, or even more, before it is possible for you to go the same road again. The blind do not, as a rule, care much for a visitor who can see. Rightly or wrongly, they think that he has come to view the nakedness of the land, and so give him but a cold reception. But, if you are able to say that you too are blind, or nearly so, then a sympathetic chord is struck which ensures a welcome. The visitation of the blind, therefore, not only secures a certain solicitude for them, but at the same time creates employment for certain of their number. On meeting with blind persons, inquiries should always be made on certain points. If the information I shall gradually indicate were systematically obtained, carefully digested, and regularly published, I cannot but think that there would be more wisdom shown, than at present, in the attempts, so benevolently and humanely made, to ameliorate the condition of the blind.

In the first place, it is said that blindness must be a crushing affliction, because, though there are 30,000 blind persons in the United Kingdom, only 800 are at work. Now, this statement, if it means anything, asserts—1, that every person goes blind at an age when he could learn to work; 2, that every person had the means of learning to work; but, 3, that, owing to the effects produced by their affliction, only 1 in 27 are able to adapt themselves to their

altered circumstances. Let us see if this be true. If the information gained by my work can be taken as representative, then the average age at which people go blind is thirty-five. Even if this could be proved to be a favourable period of life at which to make a fresh start, what means have the blind of doing so? As only one per cent. of the sightless are in independent circumstances, it is difficult to see whence would come the means of existence while the new trade was being learnt. We are, therefore, forced back on the theory, expressed long since by the Chaplain to the School for the Blind, St. George's-in-the-Fields, that the true representatives of the blind are those who are born so, or who lose their sight very early in life. This section does not exceed 4,000 at the most; and this number, divided by 800, gives 1 at work out of every 5 who might be earning, instead of 1 in 27, as the public have been led to suppose. From this, I think, it follows:—1, that blindness, *per se*, does not produce helplessness; 2, that the school and the workshop only provide for one-eighth of the blind; and, 3, that but for the Home Teaching and Visiting Societies the remainder of the blind would be totally neglected.

The homes of the blind are mostly to be found, so far as towns are concerned, in the poorest and lowest localities. In the vast majority of cases it is sheer necessity that makes such habitations endurable. The neighbours are often of questionable character; and the blind have either to associate with such persons or to live in solitude. In the face of these facts, it has been thought by some that it would be better if the blind were gathered into asylums. It is,

however, most sincerely to be hoped that no such mistake will ever be committed. Blind people have always had, and rightly, the name of a cheerful class. How long, is it thought, would that reputation last if they were once herded? An examination of the passages of Scripture bearing on this affliction reveals that blindness comes for the prevention of evil, the good of the community, and the advancement of religion.

How could these things be secured if the blind were congregated within four walls? Let the blind speak for themselves in this matter. Here is a man, a labourer, stricken blind at thirty-one. He had then a wife and three children, one of whom has since died, mainly from want. All they have to depend upon is five shillings a week from the parish. Half of this amount at once goes for rent; yet these people will submit to any hardship, resort to any shift, rather than accept the refuge of the workhouse. This, too, is not an isolated case. And, despite the fact that the wolf is always at the door, this man is always cheerful. Since his affliction the man has become a communicant and a reader of the Scriptures. Would this have happened if the man had been separated from his family and consigned to a living death?

The blind may be divided into three classes:—1st, the juvenile, or all those under fifteen years of age; 2nd, the able-bodied, or all between fifteen and forty-five years of age; 3rd, the aged, or all over forty-five. The first-named are the most difficult with which to deal. In the first place, the parents have to be convinced that to pet and over-help their

blind children is false kindness. Blind children may require a little more patience and a little more teaching than other children; but, surely, these are small matters to the true mother. Then, when the child is five years old, he ought, like other children, to go to school.

This, as matters stand, is somewhat difficult to accomplish. The child is too young to enter a school for the blind, while, on the other hand, obstacles are raised against his being taught in an ordinary day-school. The result, too often, is that four or five valuable years are wasted. Even, when the age at which he can be admitted into a school for the blind is reached, it is uncertain whether he will be educated. The parents may have a false idea of their duty, and decline to intrust their child to the care of strangers. The parents may be most anxious for the welfare of their afflicted one, but may not possess the means with which to provide the special education. The Poor Law Guardians, though they have, by a special Act, power to help such parents, do not always do so. The education of the blind will never be assured until Parliament makes it compulsory between the years of five and eighteen. I am aware that the application of such a law would necessitate the building of additional special schools out of money obtained by rates. But this is peculiarly a ratepayers' question. Which is cheaper, to keep a man all his life, or to enable him to earn, if not a complete, at least a partial, livelihood? The time spent at school is, perhaps, the brightest period in the blind man's life. In it he makes friends, and builds castles in the air. The education of the blind is, at present, defective, inasmuch as the mental

and technical instruction are given together. No one dreams of acting thus with a boy who can see. No sighted boy is taught to read, write, count, and make baskets, at one and the same time. Then, why should it be otherwise with the blind boy? In time, I suppose, this serious error will be rectified. But let us go a step further. The hour has come for the blind man to leave the school. He has to face the world, and that, too, in a fearfully unprepared condition.

Of what avail the testimonial that he is a good workman, or the present of tools which some schools make? Orders will not come all at once, and when they are obtained material is wanted for their execution. Under these difficulties many an honest, well-intentioned, able blind man has sunk, never again to rise. Many of these failures would have been prevented if the blind man could have had, say for the first three years after leaving the school, an allowance, from some source, of £10 per annum. The grants now being made by the Gardner Trust for the Blind, liberal as they are, would not meet the case, as, to obtain them, it is necessary to show that a start has been made. Various occupations present themselves to the trained blind man, but the most profitable are those of musician or basket-maker. If the man has a talent for music and has been properly trained, then he may hope, on leaving the school, to obtain an appointment worth £20 to £30 a year; and, if he can retain this, he may gradually form a connexion as teacher and tuner. If the man be a basket-maker, then he must be prepared to cover a large area of country in search of work, meet with many difficulties

and rebuffs, and, on his return home, to work continuously and laboriously in the execution of the orders he may have obtained in his rounds. I believe, from the experience I have gained among the blind, that, despite the apparent drawbacks just stated, basket-making will yield a fair livelihood. It may be said that I am not painting a bright picture of a blind man's life and prospects. That I cannot help.

What I, a blind man working among blind people, am concerned for, is that the world should know the truth. The day, thank Heaven, is passed when we were thought worthy only to be tolerated at the fire-side. The day, too, is fast going when we shall be considered prodigies, and possessed of special powers, divinely given in compensation for our loss. All that we are fighting for is that the world should realise that the seeing and the sightless are alike created by the same God, alike have the same nature, intellect, and soul, alike the power to will and think, alike the desire and the ability to work. Why, then, should I resort to the tricks of the emigration agent, and give the highest figure earned as the wage of the multitude? I am, I believe, but doing justice, when I say that the earnings of blind organists and musicians range from £40 to £100 a year; those of basket-makers from £30 to £65. The visitors to the blind obtain salaries varying from £40 to £80, but the latter sum is only reached after many years of hard and trying work.

So far I have spoken of those who are born blind, or who lose their sight early in life. I now turn to those deprived of vision at a later age. As a rule, the persons thus afflicted belong to the working classes,

and the dispensation comes upon them with peculiar force. The man who by means of long years of honest industry has gathered round him the comforts of a home, and has a wife and family dependent on his exertions, cannot but feel a pang of bitterness as the conviction deepens that his sight is going for good and ever. He holds on to his work as long as possible, and the evil day is staved off; but at last the day comes when, from no unkindness, but for their own safety, his mates are obliged to decline to work with him any longer. Then come those weary journeys to and fro to the hospital, and, at last, the sorrowful but truthful verdict, there is no hope. All this time the home comforts have been diminishing, the furniture lessening, the meals less regular and less wholesome. Can it be wondered at if for a time the man feels lost, and tempted to yield to despair? It is only those who have passed the ordeal who know its severity. But the wind is tempered to the shorn lamb. He may mope and grope at first, but the crave for action grows; and under this impetus the man does most unexpected things. He helps to keep the house in order, he becomes his wife's partner at the wash-tub, or earns odd pence by running errands or by hawking. Gradually he is content with that station in life to which it has pleased God to call him.

It is with this class of the blind that the visitor has most to do. If possible, he must teach him to read some embossed type. If not, then he must be to him a Scripture reader. He must be the medium between the blind and the world, and must help them to face their altered circumstances. Visiting may, at

first sight, seem a very easy matter; but no one will find it so who does his work in a faithful and honest spirit. To be constantly at work, reading, praying, teaching; listening to wrongs, sufferings, and grievances; brought face to face with poverty, misery, and vice, is no light task, and one which no man should rashly undertake. I know that in many societies the visitor's work is confined to teaching, and that he is exempt from going out on wet days; as, also, that in others he is but almoner and Scripture reader. In my case, however, all these duties have been combined.

Having briefly, and, as I am conscious, most imperfectly, described the capable and incapable blind, I may now turn to a detailed discussion of some of the incidents of the blind question, to most of which casual mention has already been made. After what has already been said, I do not think I need stop to further demonstrate that blindness *per se* does not produce helplessness. The question to which I would first direct attention is, does the education of the capable blind commence at a sufficiently early age? In schools for the blind the usual age of admission is ten. This rule, on the face of it, presupposes antecedent education. As I have already shown, this is rare. How is the difficulty to be met and overcome? The answer that rushes to the lips is, reduce the age of admission. But would this answer? I am afraid not. It would never, to my mind, do, to have persons varying from the age of five to that of twenty-five under the same roof. I am aware that an establishment, founded at Worcester, and now located at Kilburn, London, takes in blind children as early as

three years old; but I also know that when the children are discharged from this school they are not of an age to start life for themselves. I am also aware that the School for the Blind, St. George's-in-the-Fields, Southwark, has started a juvenile branch at Wandsworth, where children are admitted at six years of age; but, as I believe residence is restricted to six years, the child would leave at twelve, unless its admission into the adult branch could be secured.

In the face of these facts, we are driven to the alternative of creating special schools for the juvenile blind, or of having their education between the ages of five and ten carried on in elementary schools. The creation of the special schools would necessitate a large expenditure of money in bricks and mortar, and increase the varieties, already too numerous, in the mode of teaching. Besides, the money with which to build these special schools might not be forthcoming, and Government could not be expected to find the amount, unless it had first been shown that existing institutions did not meet the case. It is, therefore, clear that the present distress is to be provided for by the teaching of the elementary schools. In London, the blind children have been gathered into certain central Board Schools, and are being taught by blind teachers.

The same plan could, no doubt, be followed in the other great centres of population; but it would not meet the necessities of rural districts. There are many blind children in these districts out of reach of the town schools. Possibly a village contains one hundred seeing children and only one blind; the teacher of the elementary school may say, with appa-

rent but not real justice, "I have no objection to the child coming to school, and to receiving the school pence, but I decline to be responsible for his instruction." "And why, Mr. Teacher?" "Because he must be specially instructed; and I have already enough work on hand." But does the case necessitate so much special instruction as is supposed? The child will come at five and leave at ten years old. For the first two years, therefore, the child would be among the infants, and for the last three among the regular scholars. You need only an alphabet card with letters in the ordinary type, the only difference being that the letters are raised, so that they may be felt instead of seen. Why not supply the elementary schools with such cards?

Will it require any more special instruction to teach the blind child his alphabet? I answer, No. You wish to teach the child to spell? You have little blocks of wood with raised letters on them. These blocks are capable of being joined together. Where is there any special trouble in doing this? The simple bits of arithmetic that an infant would learn could be managed in the same manner. Then, as the child passed out of the infants' into the older class, no greater difficulties need be expected. The movable, connecting and disconnecting blocks, to which I have already referred, would meet the difficulty of each school having its own set of books.

"Well, Mr. Teacher, what do you say now?" "Well," I hope you will say, "the difficulties are not so great as I thought, and if the Education Department will give an extra grant in these cases I do not object to the task." You will not be true to the

best interests of your profession if you say otherwise.

If such a system can once be established, then we have set on foot a national and progressive education for the blind. It will, then, be compulsory on Poor-Law Guardians to find the means, when the parents cannot, with which to pay for the child's education. Then, for the next three years the education should be purely mental and musical. At the end of that time competitions should be held for scholarships to the Royal Normal College of Music for the Blind, and the College for the Blind Sons of Gentlemen. The ablest boys in the ordinary blind schools would thus pass to the two higher schools, uniformity of education would be secured among the capable blind, and it would then be possible to say that, so far as reading and instruction were concerned, one type, the Roman, was alone necessary or desirable.

Against the Roman type many objections have been made, mainly by interested persons; but, as I venture to think, without foundation. It must be borne in mind, that the youthful blind have to be taught to read a type which will not only quicken and refine their sense of touch, but which also will be of use to them at any time of life. The Moon type is so large that it would rather destroy than improve a child's touch, and I cannot understand this type ever being used in a school for the blind. The Braille type, on the other hand, is so small that, though its use would, undoubtedly, greatly improve the touch, it could not be read by persons engaged in manual labour. The Braille is, unquestionably, a class type, but not one for the multitude. But the Roman type, in the large

form, will answer all the requirements of the case. It places the child on a level with his seeing brethren. It fairly improves the touch, and it can be used in after-life, even when the touch has become deadened by hard work.

It may be asked, if this type possess these manifold advantages, why has the world heard so little about it, and why is it, at present, so little used among the blind? The answer is very simple. The Roman type publishers have never had the good fortune of enlisting the help of the wealthy blind. It has never yet been taken up by home teaching and home visiting societies, and advertised throughout the breadth and length of the land as the one and the only type to be used by the blind. It has never yet been championed by one man with a firm belief in its good qualities, and an equally firm determination that, come what may, it shall be the leading type in the education of the blind. To find such a man should be the immediate duty of the Roman type publishers, and then, through his advocacy of the real merits of their type, they may hope in time to secure the other requisites for success.

In the meantime they must go plodding on, completing their publication of the Bible, and the issuing of such books as may be deemed to be of general utility. I may here add that I have taught persons of all ages to read in Roman type. I firmly believe that, as time goes on, one great difficulty in the way of teaching this type to the adult blind will disappear.

The popular belief is that the aged blind prefer the Moon type to any other, because it is most suited to their blunted touch. But is this the case? Take

the blind who have lost their sight after they had reached the age of sixty, and what will you find? Why, that nine out of every ten of these persons never had any education, and could not, to save their lives, tell the difference between A and B. These persons have been artisans, labourers, and servants, and their ideas of shapes and forms are, therefore, of the simplest description. Nine simple forms are put before them in the Moon alphabet, as against twenty-six in the Roman alphabet; and it is not at all surprising that the blind person, having arrived at an age when the love of ease is natural, learns the easier of the competing types,—easier, not because better suited to his touch, but because there is less to learn.

But, now that there is a national system of compulsory education, we may hope that ninety-nine per cent. of the population will learn to read, and continue through life to make use of that knowledge. Then, should the sight fail in old age, the Roman type will be no novelty to the blind man, and the brain will send down a telegraphic message to the hand that a certain form is a given letter. Whatever may be said, in the present day, against the Roman type, I am convinced that it will and must be the type of the future; and the nearness of that future depends upon how soon the suggestions contained in the foregoing pages become accomplished facts.

So much for education. Now let us consider, how, and to what extent, should the blind be pecuniarily assisted? On a previous page the conviction has been expressed that much misery and failure would be prevented among the capable blind if an allowance, say of £10 a year, were made for the first three years

after the blind person left school, such an allowance, of course, to be dependent on an annual certificate that the recipient maintained a good character, and was at work. I now wish to go a step further. I venture to think that the capable blind should be placed in this position. Say that he has had the allowance referred to above. Then, at the end of the next three years, the blind should, if they could show, 1, continued good character; 2, continued application to work; and, 3, a slight improvement in circumstances, be entitled to apply for a grant of money in furtherance of their trade; and this application should be renewable once in every three years. If such a scheme could once be fairly brought into operation, the prospects of the capable blind would be bright, for they might then look forward to a life of honourable activity, and a constant improvement of circumstances.

As regards the incapable blind, the only way in which they can be dealt with is by pensions. On what principle should these be granted? The age at which the present pensions for the blind are granted vary considerably, the Blind Man's Friend Fund receiving applications from persons over twenty-one years of age, and the Hetherington Gift not being attainable until sixty. Both are extreme limits, and I think the requirements of the case would be better met if the minimum age at which pensions become obtainable should be thirty-five. The question then arises, Are all the blind to be assisted, or only those who may be deemed to be deserving of help? Under present arrangements, one-third of the blind are shut out from the list of applicants because they are in receipt of parochial relief; deducting these and the capable

blind, there would still be some 16,000 blind to be considered. Even assuming that the suggested assistance to the capable blind came from the State, the total distributable income of the various charities devoted to the blind would not exceed £30,000, or about 10d. a week for each of the 16,000.

We have had several handsome bequests for the benefit of our class, and when a few more have been added to the list our position will be somewhat improved. The latest in this direction, that by Mr. Gardner, has been the greatest in amount, and is, I believe, destined to do the blind the greatest service, as, owing to the freedom of action left to the trustees, the distribution of the income can be in accord with the spirit and requirements of any age.

There is one other point on which I wish to say a word. Is blindness preventible? Before vaccination became general, small-pox was the cause of one-fifth of the blindness then prevalent. Now it does not cause more than one per cent. The principal cause, other than congenital, of juvenile blindness is inflammation. From the private history of such cases, I am led to the conclusion that, in many of them, the affliction might have been prevented. In one case that has come under my notice, the injury to the sight was due to a neglect of soap and water. For the last fifty years there has been a steady decrease in the numbers of the blind; but, for all that, I am afraid the day will never come when blindness will be unknown.

Two causes have, I think, mainly produced this decrease, viz., 1, the increased care evinced in mining operations; and, 2, the increased medical skill in treating the diseases to which the eye is subject. But

against these signs of hope must be set the physical effects bound to be caused by the high pressure at which life, at each succeeding stage, is conducted. While the hope may be cherished that at each succeeding census the proportion of blind persons to those who see will be lessened, it is idle to think that this lamentable affliction will cease to be. All to be done, then, is to ask our heavenly Father to give those of us who may be so afflicted grace to accept His mysterious dispensation, and also that those who can see the glories of His creation will cease to think that the blind are an inferior people, and give them every fair opportunity to display their abilities. When we know that Sanderson, the mathematician, never saw the light and yet was a capable exponent of the laws of optics; that Huber made himself the authority on bees; that Stanley, the organist, could transpose, on the spur of the moment, into a key to which no sighted musician would have ventured without considerable preparation; that Professor Fawcett achieved parliamentary success; and that others, in humbler positions are bravely earning daily bread, may we not think that, while the endurance of the blind has been the wonder of so many, their capacity of exertion has been somewhat undervalued? All that I, as a blind man, ask, is a fair field and no favour.



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